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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 002453

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/WATERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWBG](#) [PBTS](#) [IS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [JO](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: HAMAS AND PA DUEL FOR CONTROL OF HAJJ PILGRIMAGE
ARRANGEMENTS

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Thomas Duffy, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Deputy Waqf/Religious Affairs Minister Salah Zuhaykah told PolOff November 29 that Hamas is obstructing PA efforts to move Hajj pilgrims out of Gaza through Erez Crossing in an effort to force the use of Rafah crossing and avoid Israeli screening of pilgrims. He said only 200 (out of over 2000) Hajj applicants have applied for Hajj visas through the PA because of Hamas intimidation of Gaza's Arab Bank branches that accept processing fees for the PA and courier companies and threats to punish pilgrims who apply through the PA. Zuhaykah said Gazans who exit through Erez will be transported to Allenby Bridge and Amman as of December 2.

Hamas Planning Major "Border Demonstration"

12. (C) Contacts in the Gaza Governor's office (Fatah) report that 2,200 Gazans have applied for the Hajj through ex-PM Ismayil Haniyah's Hamas-controlled Waqf offices. They say Hamas is pressuring the GOE to open Rafah Crossing and plans a demonstration at the Gaza-Egypt border near Rafah Crossing December 5 or 6 with thousands of prospective pilgrims and Hamas security escorts. Hamas outlets are publicly announcing that pilgrims will exit Gaza through Rafah Crossing, will receive Saudi visas in Egypt and transit to Medina/Mecca. (Note: Zuhaykah said the Saudi MFA will not issue visas to Palestinian pilgrims outside the PA-sanctioned process, and told him they will only issue Hajj visas to Palestinians in Amman. End note).

Comment

13. (C) Hamas leaders are unlikely to accept GOI screening of Hajj pilgrims, and apparently want to use the Hajj as an opportunity to challenge the GOI closure of Rafah and PA ministries' authority in Gaza. Hamas controls the Israeli-constructed border wall and Philadelphia Corridor, and Hamas border police prevent individual Palestinians from crossing the Gaza-Egypt border fence. However, Hamas has moved small groups through the fence in recent months and may/may assist a mass exfiltration if pilgrims cannot use Rafah.
DUFFY